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CHAPTER XIII

THE FORM OF TALE SOCIETY

The Socio-geographic Region

OUR survey of the macroscopic structure of Tale society has led us from the consideration of the natives' habits of grouping themselves by name, through an analysis of Tale clanship, to the ritual institutions that form the crowning mechanism of co-ordination in the system, and finally to the internal structure of the settlement and the lineage. An ethnographer accustomed to think of a native society as a unit of social organization marked off by precise territorial, political, or cultural boundaries might protest against our frequent references to 'Tale society'. But this habit of thought, appropriate enough in dealing with island communities, nomadic tribes, or territorially organized states, must be discarded if we wish to understand the structure of societies like that of the Tallensi. For the concept of a society as a closed unit, a sort of thing distinguishable from like things in the same way as one house is distinguishable from another or one animal from another, we must substitute the concept of society as a socio-geographic region, the social elements of which are more closely knit together among themselves than any of them are knit together with social elements of the same kind outside that region. We must substitute a relative and dynamic concept for an absolute and static one. If we look at the area of Voltaic culture as a whole, we can imagine innumerable currents of social life flowing through it in all directions. There are major currents and tributary currents. They intersect in all sorts of ways. But at particular places the forces of which the currents are an expression act in such a way as to draw together a large number, if not all, of the major currents. These regions of maximum confluence would correspond to what we have called a socio-geographic region, or a society. If we follow any single current from a region of maximum confluence it leads us right out of that region into another region. It is only if we look at the region from within that we see the coherence it has as a result of the confluence of many social currents.

But metaphors are proverbially treacherous and we must return to our proper subject-matter. The concept of society we have formulated enables us to see clearly the most characteristic feature of Tale society. It is a segmentary[1] system. At bottom this is a consequence of the fact that the Tallensi have not got a centralized, unified, political organization. This is clear if we compare the Tallensi with some other African peoples such as the Tswana of Bechuanaland Protectorate,[2] the Bemba of Northern

[1] Cf. Fortes, M., and Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (editors), *African Political Systems*, 1940, 'Introduction', and Evans-Pritchard, E. E., *The Nuer*, 1940.

[2] Cf. Schapera, I., *Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom*, 1938, and 'The Political Organization of the Ngwato', in *African Political Systems*, cited above.

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631 Rhodesia,[1] or the Ashanti of the Gold Coast.[2] These peoples have a
171 pyramidal social structure corresponding to their pyramidal form of government. From the village to the tribal unit we find a hierarchy of territorial-political units, the greater made up of a collection of the lesser, and culminating in the whole tribal unit. This is associated with a corresponding hierarchy of political offices, from the village headman to the paramount chief at the apex. Among the Tallensi[3] there is no single person or body of persons vested with supreme executive and administrative authority over the whole of Taleland. Government is laterally distributed amongst all the corporate units that make up the society, instead of being vertically distributed as in pyramidal societies. All the corporate units are, broadly speaking, politically equal; all are segments of the same structural order.

621 This is one aspect of what is meant by describing Tale society as segmentary in form. But the concept has further implications. The corporate units that compose Tale society are not a casual agglomerate of discrete bodies, but are socially articulated and interconnected with one another; and they are thus interrelated in a segmentary series. This principle of association between defined social units runs right through the structure of Tale society. It means that small units of a particular form are, like cells, associated together into larger units of the same general form, and these again associated into still larger units of analogous or identical form, and so on up to the limits of the system. This rule holds whether the associations are temporary, for a particular end, or form permanent groupings. Furthermore, the principles according to which the associations occur are either uniform for a whole series of segments of increasing dimension or are so related to one another that principles operating on one level presuppose the principles operating on a lower level.

128 This is an architectural way of looking at the structure of Tale society. It is the line we have largely followed in the preceding chapters, where we have been concerned with the largest corporate units into which the Tallensi are organized. Our attention has been fixed mainly on the permanent edifice in which social relations and activities are congealed rather than on their emergence in process. We have been analysing the product of social segmentation rather than the process itself. To distinguish between product and process is, however, merely an analytic convenience in dealing with social facts. In reality what we denote as a product is a set of regularities and recurrences of process. A corporate unit is really the sum total of corporate relations and activities occurring amongst a defined group of individuals. We can think of a maximal lineage as an architectural segment of a composite clan in the same way as we can picture one storey of a modern building as a lateral segment of the whole. A maximal lineage, however, differs from a part of a building of brick and wood in that it is not always 'there', tactually and visibly.

[1] Cf. Richards, Audrey I., 'The Political System of the Bemba Tribe', in *African Political Systems*, and *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia*, 1939.

[2] Cf. Rattray, R. S., *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, 1929.

[3] A fuller analysis will be found in the 'Introduction' and in my article on 'The Political System of the Tallensi' in *African Political Systems*.

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428 allotted by the father. On the death of the head of the family the male survivors inherit the land in varying proportions as tenants in 423 common with benefits of survivorship. The eldest son assumes the responsibilities of his father and may elect to live either in his father's compound, or to remain in his own. In either case he will receive a large share of his father's farm and retain also an interest in his own. After a number of generations the distribution and ownership of land becomes very complicated in congested areas and considerable fragmentation of holdings takes place. Land not in use may be lent to another for farming, but often with a stipulation to plant non-exhausting crops.

Distribution of Population.

162 The distribution of population is very variable both from one political area to another and within each area. If one takes the the district as a whole, 3,559 square miles, the population by the 1931 census (7) is shown to be 406,566 persons; this gives a density of population of 114 per square mile (c.f. South Mamprusi 23 per square mile, and Western Dagomba 15). It is estimated that at least one-third of the total area is uninhabited, and much of this is fertile alluvial land near to rivers, where tse-tse flies abound. In other areas ruins are found for which slave raiding, sleeping sickness, and yellow fever, are variously held responsible. Table I below gives the distribution of tribes and population.

Table 1.—Distribution of Population in North Mamprusi.

Political Area	Area, square miles	Total Population	Density of Population per sq. ml.	Tribes
Navrongo ...	1,551	120,870	78	Nankani, Kassena, and Builsa.
Zuarungu ...	781	133,981	172	Nankani, Tallensi, and Nabdam.
Kusasi and Br. Togoland ...	807 420	110,614 41,101	137 98	Kusasi, Busanga, Bemoba and strangers.
Total ...	3,559	406,566	114	—

Political Organisation.

●631 History shows that North Mamprusi was continually harrassed from outside (8) until comparatively recent times. The Mamprusis in the South, who were at one time a powerful and organised tribe,

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conquered many of the small tribes in North Mamprusi and superimposed their rule upon the indigenous clan system. Thus many of the Chiefs in the district to-day are of Mamprusi descent and pay tribute to the Nayiri, the paramount Mamprusi Chief at Nalerigu, near Gambaga. There is little tribal cohesion amongst the family sections, or clans, and it is upon their federation into a political unit, the Mamprusi State, that political officers have been engaged recently, following Government's policy of Indirect Rule through native Administration. The clans in Zuarungu and Kusasi now come into the Mamprusi Native Administration; those of Navrongo have formed Administrations of their own. Direct taxation was introduced in 1936 and marked an important step forward. A large proportion of the money collected is to be spent upon social services in the areas of collection, and agriculture is not being neglected.

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Recent Slave Raids.

In addition to conquest from the South, the district was continually invaded by mounted slave-raiders from the North. There is no doubt that the unsettled conditions produced by these raids have had a profound effect upon the economic and social life of the people. The importance of this from our point of view is that now, with settled conditions, the people may be expected to adjust themselves, in time, to the new order of things, and to be prepared to modify their system of farming where necessary. It is probable that these invasions, together with tse-tse fly in heavy bush, tended to concentrate the population around the rocky hills characteristic of the district, where the horsemen would be at a disadvantage. The attention of the people appears to have been concentrated more upon weapons—bows and arrows, or spears, still used to-day for ceremony and hunting—than upon agricultural implements. It is also a significant fact that the indigenous system of agriculture requires no operation to be performed on the farm during the dry season, which is the season of the year when invasion would take place. The burning of the grass in the dry season may have been done to reduce the chance of surprise attack.

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Agriculture a Custom, not a Business.

As might be expected from tribes consisting of small units having continually to defend themselves and losing many of their strongest men in fighting or taken as slaves, the people in North Mamprusi remained, economically, very primitive. Although the system of agriculture is "fixed", which is generally regarded as an advance upon "shifting cultivation", it leaves much to be desired. Farming methods have not been adjusted sufficiently quickly to

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